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Mexico in 1999: Taking back the UNAM

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ABSTRACT: In 1999, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) reversed course on its tradition of free education and installed a tuition requisite for attendance. In response, students launched a massive strike and eventually overturned the decision. This paper explores the possible role global institutions like the IMF may have played and argues that the strike was part of a broader movement against economic globalization. This paper places the student strike in its proper context and analyzes how students perceived their role in the strike.

KEYWORDS: UNAM, Mexico, globalization, education, Zapatismo

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ESSAY

This paper argues that the student strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in 1999 was both a movement to maintain educational rights in Mexico and against external pressure on the Mexican government to conform to gloablization measures. In January of 1999, the UNAM, the largest public university in Latin America, attempted to impose tuition for enrollment at the university — one that had a revered history of free access to education. Many students perceived the administrative decision to change this tradition as supported and pushed for by international globalization institutions — namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The belief among several at the university was that tuition fee at the university was part of a larger plan to subject higher education in Mexico to market forces.

In response to the tuition imposition, students of the university, with the support of some faculty and community members, took action in protest and occupied the university. The student strike drew inspiration from two main sources — one being the Zapatista uprising of 1994, which launched a militant, leftist opposition movement in Chiapas, Mexico to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); the other being the Mexican student movement of 1968, which brought the issues of student power and the role of students in society to the forefront. The 1999 student occupation was the offspring of these two social theaters in an effort to maintain the Mexican tradition of higher educational rights and to halt the growth of globalization in Mexico.

There are several excellent studies on education and globalization, especially in terms of policy, theory, and reform. On a macro level, the interplay between the two has been comprehensively analyzed and deconstructed. One year before the student strike in Mexico, for example, a chapter in Universities and Globalization: Critical Perspectives, edited by Jan Currie and Janice Newson, assessed the role of free trade agreements on educational standards and technology at the UNAM. Authors Heriberta Castaños–Lomnitz, Axel Didriksson, and Janice Newson posit, before the onset of the tuition or the strike, that the educational standards (on a pedagogical level) being imposed by national and international forces on the UNAM in the 1990s were at odds with its traditional orientation of liberal education — thereby providing an analysis of policy changes that would soon become issues for the students at the university. Other scholars such as Judith Hellman and Carlos Torres have also studied globalization's impact in Mexico and education in the age of global free market economic reform.

The most seminal work done on this subject specifically is that of Liliana Mina and Robert A. Rhoads's "The Student Strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico: A Political Analysis," which appeared in Comparative Economic Review (CER), a journal focused on the political economy of education mainly outside of the U.S. In their paper, the authors lay the foundational groundwork for studying the student movement by providing an analysis of the internal dynamics of the strike, the variety of opinions among students concerning the strike, and different political theories (namely those of Antonio Gramsci and of Karl Mannheim) in the context of the movement. Although their paper makes an important contribution, it omits what the intended audience of the CER may have taken for granted — the larger political, social, and economic context in which the strike took place. It is therefore the intention of this paper to supplement their work by delineating the role of globalization in creating an atmosphere for an explosive student response and to display how discourse beyond the strike frequently neglected to recognize these forces.

To summarize, what the literature on these subjects has neglected (with a few notable exceptions), perhaps by mere oversight or a lack of legitimacy with regard to the subject, are the instances in which globalization was resisted. Comparatively little has been written from a bottom–up perspective. By contrast, this article argues that the movement to maintain higher educational rights in Mexico was in fact a popular struggle to preserve the legacy of free education in opposition to international pressure to privatize higher education. While this article is not an attempt at a social history of the student movement, its goal is to place the student movement in the context of expanding globalization in Mexico.

Beginning in February of 1999, the Mexican student strike at the UNAM arose out of the university administration's attempt to impose a tuition payment of approximately $90 USD per semester for enrollment.[1] Under such conditions, education at the university would still be largely publicly funded; and in fact, The New York Times had reported early in the strike that the projected tuition would cover only 8% of the university's expenditure — the rest being paid for through public subsidies.[2] Students responded to the new tuition

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requirement by occupying the UNAM campus and organizing themselves into an official group called the General Strike Council (CGH). The tuition was reversed in November 1999 after months of occupation, international attention, and outbreaks of violence at the UNAM. Francisco Barnés de Castro, the rector of the UNAM at the time, even resigned as a result of the events surrounding the occupation that same month. The perception among opponents was that the imposition of tuition would prevent lower–income students — in a country with high poverty levels — from being able to receive an education. Additionally, the UNAM had a tradition of being free and accessible to all Mexican citizens which would have been undermined had the tuition been successfully instituted. Moreover, students and other protesters were concerned that the tuition imposition was part of a long–term plan to privatize the university.

Article 3 of the Constitution of Mexico, created in 1917 during the Mexican Revolution, contains a clause stating that "All education given by the State shall be free."[3] Though contested, the feeling among the students who chose to participate in the occupation was that requiring tuition at the UNAM violated the rights of citizens guaranteed by the Constitution. Moreover, the students had long believed in the UNAM's long–standing policy of maintaining open access to education. As evidence of this, students opposed and successfully lobbied to reverse a decision in 1987 that mandated the passing of an entrance exam in order to be accepted to the university. The student body viewed the precondition of an entrance exam as contrary to the university's purpose of ensuring higher educational opportunities in Mexico.[4] Additionally, students felt that such violations of their educational rights were representative of the fact that their voices were not being heard in the processes of their university — describing the decision–making process as "anti–democratic."[5] By going on strike, the students were forcing the attention of the university and the national government for having been ignored on matters of administrative decision making at the UNAM.

Supporters of tuition reform, however, saw the change as necessary and pragmatic. Proponents often pointed out that enrollment at the UNAM had drastically increased since free–access education was guaranteed in 1917 — therefore taking up a larger portion of state expenditure than initially intended. Some supporters also wanted to see the UNAM assume a more competitive, prestigious place in academia and felt that the open–access nature of the university hindered it from doing so; especially since its enrollment model allowed students to attend the university for several years on end. These points appeared as reasonable rationales to many Mexican officials, citizens, and even students before the tuition reform was officially implemented.

While the strike had roots in events transpiring within Mexico City, a great deal of substance to the tuition reform and strike is missing without examining the broader global framework. Understanding the Mexican student strike in the context of global economics first requires an understanding of the term "globalization" and its dimensions in relation to education. When referenced without adjectives, "globalization" can signify many different methods of the world becoming more integrated. The word, however, can also evoke the confusion of theory and practice — though the two are frequently different. For the purpose of this study, "globalization" will chiefly be explored in a political economy context and will refer to the actual processes by which multilateral institutions attempt to impose free market policies (whether or not they in fact do).

So–called free market policies generally work to "[redraw] the boundaries between 'public' and 'private,'"[6] with the goal on a global level of achieving an efficient international market economy.[7] Therefore, expanding privatization, relieving the hold public institutions have over local and domestic resources, and creating trade agreements that are favorable to a larger transnational market all fall under the umbrella of contemporary economic globalization policies. In terms of education, particularly higher education, globalization often leads societies to move towards a privatized or less publicly-subsidized system of education — one in which education is paid for on an individual basis.[8] It is in these ways that globalization will be examined in the context of education — as an effort to convert education into an entity that exists within a global market economy and to relocate the responsibility of funding education from the public to the individual.

The primary institutions which facilitate globalization are often referred to as international financial institutions (IFIs). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank are two of the largest, most influential institutions of globalization. Both are multilateral organizations that operate within the global economy in order to "ensure the stability of the international monetary system" in the case of the IMF[9] and "[provide a] vital

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source of financial and technical assistance to developing countries" in the case of the World Bank.[10] Though such activity may not be stated in their mission statements, both multilaterals were influential in the move to impose tuition at the UNAM. As explained by global studies scholar Susan George, the IMF and the World Bank work to introduce structural adjustment packages (SAPs) to poorer, sometimes called "underdeveloped," countries that require public services to be gradually converted to private domain. [11] Moreover, education had long been a primary target for pro–market politics in Latin America. Claudio Loser, Director of the Western Hemisphere Department of the IMF from 1992–2002, in fact was quoted in *The New York Times* saying, "if one looks at the allocation of resources for education it is clear that in Latin America there is a bias toward universities."[12] As outlined by Dr. Loser, a fundamental concern for the IMF during this time was to reduce the role of public funding in higher education. Additionally, Mexico had long been at the whim of the IMF, as noted by social science scholar and specialist of Mexican affairs Judith Hellman, since a $4 billion SAP loan (not adjusted for inflation) that mandated cuts to state spending in 1982.

The 1982 SAP marked a watershed moment in Mexico's economy — described by scholars Laura Carlsen, Hilda Salazar, and Timothy Wise as the beginning of the opening of Mexico's economy. Accepted during a debt crisis, the 1982 SAP created a new groundwork for the Mexican economy in which public costs would be reduced in order to balance the national budget and be able to repay the loan (as well as other mounting foreign debt). In the years following the acceptance of the SAP, Mexico joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and began implementing changes to public policy and expenditure.[13] The attempt to impose a tuition cost in 1999 was in fact the third attempt to introduce tuition reform since 1982 — the first being in 1986. At the time of the first attempt to impose a tuition requirement at the UNAM, the de la Madrid administration was instituting a series of domestic programs aimed at reducing state spending — the main condition of the 1982 SAP.[14] As Mexico pursued economic stabilization policies, the UNAM attempted to implement tuition reform again in 1994 and 1999. In short, alleviating the financial burden of the UNAM to state spending was an early component of meeting the IMF's loan conditions.

More than the tuition itself, though, what many students feared, as did many others in Mexico, was the possibility of a long term shift toward an "Americanized," market–driven economy and society — one at odds with social justice sentiments held dear to many students and Mexican citizens. Implementing market reforms was a definite goal of both the PRI, the ruling party in Mexico since the early twentieth century, and the relevant IFIs.[15] Considering Mexico's tradition of open enrollment at the UNAM, such public-to-private changes were in fact at odds with Mexico City's legacy of being able to provide fair educational opportunities to all citizens. Contemporary globalization measures initiated by large IFI actors struck fear that the entire higher educational system would eventually be privatized, beginning with the initial installment of a tuition requirement. Demonstrating cognizance of the role of international economic actors in the tuition reform, the student — led General Strikes Council (CGH) published its "Manifesto to the Nation," officially issued the month after the occupation began, denouncing the tuition fees "[as] an initiative from international organizations like the OCDE and World Bank, whose main interest is to diminish social spending in underdeveloped countries."[16] In other words, the striking students acknowledged early on specific institutions as well as the broader context of a plan to reduce the role of public services in the economy.

In its manifesto, the CGH also expressed its concerns about other issues they claimed called for a student strike, such as the use of military violence to suppress student activism and other issues pertaining to the university's activities. The internal structure of the university constituted a particularly strong concern for the strikers, as vocalized in their public platform. Many were worried that turning education into a commodity would threaten the traditional role and nature of the university — diverting resources from liberal arts studies to departments that teach courses that some argue are more beneficial to a business economy. One student enrolled in a UNAM–operated high school described the intentions of the student strike in an interview with The New York Times, stating that "[w]e don't want a university that just serves private companies....We want [the UNAM] to be at the service of society."[17] An additional concern, as demonstrated by this quote, was that the tuition being called for by Rector Barnés would not only jeopardize the Mexican tradition of open access to higher education, but would introduce new interests that would shift the focus of the university toward areas of study most sought after by private companies — immersing Mexico more into an "Americanized," market–based economic order. As mentioned earlier,

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the UNAM had already begun reforming its curricula according to the new business sector–needs from its tradition of education for the purpose of "various social and cultural projects."[18] Students were combatting both the attempt to globalize the Mexican economy and the potential outcome of a corporate–structured university.

Evaluating the student strike in the context of global events concerning the UNAM is the first step in understanding the student response; evaluating the student strike in the context of national events in Mexico is next. The broader view of the introduction of a tuition expectation at the UNAM is rooted in the political climate in Mexico during the late 1990s. Globally integrated free market reform was a contested idea within Mexico — its effects had been seen by the Mexican population in their own country. On January 1, 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed and put into effect, brokering a significant and controversial trade agreement between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. NAFTA was viewed among a large portion of the Mexican population as a deal made in order to more easily allow the intervention of transnational corporations in Mexico. In response to its passing, a guerrilla organization known as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN, Zapatista movement, or Zapatistas) revolted in Chiapas, Mexico — launching a violent campaign in opposition to the Mexican government and the passing of NAFTA. Made up largely of indigenous peoples, the EZLN procured the attention not only of the Mexican people, but also drew international attention.

The EZLN was, in a basic sense, an indigenous peoples' movement against perceived neoliberal policy embodied in NAFTA. The Zapatista movement was so influential, in fact, that it informed a new, Mexican ideology, "Zapatismo," that became "an alternative model to neoliberal capitalism."[19] The uprising marked one of the most significant events related to the spread of global capitalism — given that it took place in direct response to a massive trade agreement and earned a remarkable amount of international attention. Moreover, the EZLN continued to exist and make a notable presence in Mexico's political scene for years after the initial revolt — staging road blocks, sit–ins, and occupations around issues and political events concerning the Zapatista platform.[20]

The relevance of the Zapatista movement to the student strike is in understanding the social climate that existed in Mexico around globalization and popular movements. Furthermore, both movements had similar ideological bases. For example, the CGH had begun using iconography of the famous revolutionary Che Guevara in their art and banners — a popular figure used by the EZLN as well.[21] More importantly, both the student movement of 1999 and the EZLN were in fact consciously formed in response to contemporary free trade reforms in Mexico.

To sum up, the 1990s were a time in which anti-globalization ideology was solidified — due in large part to the tempestuous response to NAFTA, especially that of the EZLN. In fact, in order to demonstrate how monumental the Zapatista movement was to creating a social atmosphere of anti–globalization, Mihalis Mentinis, a researcher of radical politics, credits the EZLN for "[marking] the beginning of, and [inspiring] a wave of protests…which [identify] the enemy as neoliberalism."[22] Mentinis also notes that the EZLN was in fact a "source of significant inspiration for the students of the UNAM" and even met with them after the strike had commenced to articulate their support for the movement.[23] The growth of anti–global capitalist movements contributed to a social ambiance in which globalization was often viewed negatively by segments of the Mexican population.

Continuing to explore the 1999 Mexican student strike in the context of national events, another notable source of inspiration for the movement was in fact personally important to the history of the UNAM. The Mexican student movement of 1968, conducted by students at the UNAM and other Mexican universities, established the UNAM's importance to the history of student movements. Though different in its nature and behavior than the student strike of 1999, the student movement of 1968 "began as a direct response to a long history of police brutality" that had primarily targeted past student movements in attempts to heighten student involvement in the processes of the UNAM and other Mexican universities.[24] Essentially, unrest over a number of issues about which students had raised their voices and over which students went on strike in the past had been dealt with by Mexican authorities through the use of force. At that time, protests ended in a violent effort to eliminate the student movement by Mexican authorities.

The Mexican student movement of 1968 also had a broader connection to previous student movements — particularly to a strike that took place in 1958 —

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and left an imprint on Mexican student history, anti–authoritarian culture, and left–influenced movements in Mexico.[25] Because of this legacy, the Mexican student movement of 1968 was important to the Mexican student movement of 1999 in two ways: first in producing a definitive history of student activism and second in making "student" an important identity in Mexico. Regarding the first point, an important link in both movements is their relevance in the international stage. Though slightly different, the Mexican student movement of 1968 existed in the context of a number of different student movements taking place across the world, including Argentina, France, and the United States; similarly, the student movement of 1999 existed in the context of a number of different movements taking place in opposition to globalization.[26] Secondly, an important commonality between both movements is their emphasis on student–led, student–based direct action in social justice and policy issues. The movement of 1968 offered an example of how students can have a role in the administrative decisions that affect them and their communities. There is certainly a historical connection between the presence of students in matters of social and economic policy in the Mexican student movement of 1968 and the Mexican student strike of 1999. This legacy of student activism, existing in a global framework, and student involvement in national and global issues, both of which were defining features of the 1999 student strike, in many ways paralleled the history of student activism displayed in the Mexican student movement of 1968.

The 1999 strike ended after about 10 months of occupation. Beginning in April 1999 in direct response to the January administrative decision to institute a tuition policy, the strike immediately gained national and international attention. In the summer of that year, Rector Barnés announced that the tuition would instead only be voluntary.[27] Despite this concession, though, the students continued to occupy the UNAM until their initial demands had been met. That November, Rector Barnés caved in and announced that the tuition would be entirely scrapped and resigned from his position. After the tuition had officially been struck down, the movement took a new shape as students continued occupying the university in pursuit of additional demands. Though the strike was successful in achieving its main goal, the occupation was crushed through military force in February of 2000 under the university's new rector and President Ernesto Zedillo of the PRI — effectively quelling the Mexican student strike. [28]

The Mexican student strike of 1999 was a highly turbulent event existing in an extremely complex framework. The movement was not only an effort to maintain the UNAM's tradition of accessible education; it was also a conscious backlash against the attempt to forge a globalized economy through the use of multilateral institutions like the IMF and World Bank. Further, one must understand that the strike was neither spontaneous nor ahistorical. Crucial to the elements which led to the strike was the sociopolitical climate. Taking into account Mexico's recent history of being subjected to capitalist reforms, particularly through the use of SAPs, as well as the country's history of anti-globalization movements, the student strike of 1999 in fact evolved from these conditions. The move to institute a tuition requirement for students at the UNAM fits into a larger geopolitical attempt to turn Latin America into a haven of free market politics while the 1999 Mexican student strike was part of a global justice movement against this trend. Considering Mexico's history of student activism, it is understandable that a popular movement would arise in response to this attempt to impose a tuition requirement at Latin America's largest university. The significance of these events is also felt in the modern world. Considering the rising cost of education in countries like the U.S., where growing student debt has become a national concern, the effects of globalization on numerous countries throughout the world, especially in Latin America, and the success of popular movements like that of the 1999 Mexican student strike, the events leading up to the student strike shed light on the relationship between education and globalization.

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ENDNOTES

1. For reference, average annual household income in Mexico during the late 1990s was about $1,500 USD. Cohn, D'vera, Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, and Jeffrey S. Passel, "V. Mexico, by the Numbers," Pew Research Center, April 23, 2012.

2. Julia Preston, "University Officials Yield to Student Strike in Mexico," *The New York Times* (June 8, 1999): 12.

3. Constitution of Mexico, art. 3, cl. 7 (February 5, 1917).

4. Mina and Rhoads, "The Student Strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico," 338.

5. Ibid., 339.

6. Richard Stubbs and Geoffrey R.D. Underhill, *Political Economy and the Changing Global Order* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 82.

7. Ibid., 75.

8. Carlos Alberto Torres, *Education and Neoliberal Globalization* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 16.

9. International Monetary Fund website, accessed March 10, 2016, www.imf.org/external/about.htm.

10. World Bank website, accessed March 10, 2016, www.worldbank.org/en/about/what-we-do.

11. Susan George, *Speaking Freely Volume 2: Susan George on Neoliberalism*, Documentary, directed by Philippe Diaz, Cinema Libre Studio (August 21, 2007), DVD.

12. Anthony DePalma, "Economic View: Latin America Pays a Price for Its Education Policies," *The New York Times* (April 9, 2000): 4.

13. Judith Hellman, "Structural Adjustment in Mexico and the Dog That Didn't Bark," *CERLAC Working Paper Series* (April 1997): 3. Laura Carlsen, Hilda Salazar, and Timothy Wise, "Globalization and Popular Resistance in Mexico" in *Confronting Globalization: Economic Integration and Popular Resistance in Mexico*, eds. Laura Carlsen, Hilda Salazar, and Timothy Wise (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, Inc., 2003), 1.

14. James Petras, Henry Veltmeyer, and Steve Vieux, *Neoliberalism and Class Conflict in Latin America* (London: Macmillian Press LTD, 1997), 143, 153.

15. Liliana Mina and Robert A. Rhoads, "The Student Strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico: A Political Analysis," *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (August 2001): 335.

16. General Strike Council, "Manifiesto a la Nación," March 25, 1999.

17. Julia Preston, "University Officials Yield to Student Strike in Mexico," *The New York Times* (June 8, 1999): 12.

18. Castaños-Lomnitz, Didriksson, Newson, "Reshaping the Educational Agendas of Mexican Universities," 291.

19. Michael Kirkpatrick, "Alex Khasnabish, Zapatistas: Rebellion from the Grassroots," *Canadian Committee on Labour History* (2011): 224.

20. Maria de la Luz Inclán, "From the ¡Ya Basta! to the Caracoles: Zapatista Mobilization under Transitional Conditions," *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 113, No. 5 (March 2008).

21. David Adams, "Strikers Hold Education Hostage," *St. Petersburg Times* (November 19, 1999): 1A.

22. Mihalis Mentinis, *Zapatistas: The Chiapas Revolt and What It Means for Radical Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 136.

23. Ibid., 23.

24. Jaime Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2013), 205.

25. Claire Brewster and Keith Brewster, "The Mexican Student Movement of 1968: An Olympic Perspective," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* Vol. 26, No. 6 (May 2009).

26. Ibid.

27. Preston, "University Officials Yield to Student Strike in Mexico," 12.

28. Mentinis, *Zapatistas*, 24-25.

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